

**03/15/21 Monday**

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Cannabis Inhibits SARS-CoV-2 Replication in Human Lungs, Study Suggests  
by [Mary F.](#)

With the SARS-CoV-2 virus causing almost 3 million deaths worldwide, researchers have been scrambling to learn more about the deadly COVID-19 disease that has threatened global public health and world economies.

A new [study](#), published on preprint server bioRxiv last week, suggests that a cannabis plant compound inhibited infection with SARS-CoV-2 in human lung cells.

According to the researchers at the University of Chicago in Illinois, cannabidiol (CBD), a chemical in the Cannabis sativa plant, also known as marijuana, and its metabolite 7-OH-CBD, blocked SARS-CoV-2 replication in lung epithelial cells. Epithelial cells are cells that come from body surfaces, such as the skin, blood vessels, urinary tract or organs.

The researchers also found that CBD appeared to inhibit viral gene expression and reverse many of the effects SARS-CoV-2 has on host gene transcription. CBD also appeared to bring about the expression of interferons, proteins released by cells, in response to the entry of viruses, that are supposed to inhibit virus replication. In addition, for those patients who had been taking CBD, the incidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection was up to an order of a magnitude lower than in patients who had not been taking CBD.

"This study highlights CBD, and its active metabolite, 7-OH-CBD, as potential preventative agents and therapeutic treatments for SARS-CoV-2 at early stages of infection," lead author Marsha Rosner and her colleagues told [News Medical](#).

This is not the first time that scientists have suggested that CBD may help prevent COVID-19. According to Dr. Frank Lucido, a family practice physician who works with medical cannabis patients, CBD can potentially reduce cytokines, which are substances secreted by cells of the immune system as part of the body's natural immune response.

"CBD looks promising in reducing the cytokine storm, which seems to be the most damaging aspect of COVID-19 infection," Lucido told the [San Francisco Chronicle](#) in September 2020. In a [peer-reviewed article](#) published in the journal Brain, Behavior and Immunity, researchers from the University of Nebraska and the Texas Biomedical Research Institute also said CBD decreased SARS-CoV-2 induced lung inflammation, and also prohibited cytokine production by immune cell.

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'Move Fast': Zarif Urges US to Return to Nuclear Deal Before Iran's Upcoming Presidential Election  
by [Mary F.](#)

Tensions between Iran and the US have been running high since former US President Donald Trump withdrew Washington from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal on May 8, 2018.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif urged the United States to quickly rejoin the Iranian nuclear accord, warning that Iran's June presidential elections could prevent progress in any talks.

"A lame-duck government will not be able to do anything serious. And then we will have a waiting period of almost six months. We will not have a government before September," Zarif said during an online conference with the European Policy Centre think-tank in Brussels, [The Times of Israel reported](#).

"A lot of things can happen between now and September. So, it is advisable for the United States to move fast," Zarif advised.

Iran has repeatedly stated that the US, which pulled out of the nuclear deal, must make the first move to make amends and should not set any preconditions.

"We are ready to go back immediately after the United States goes back to implementation of the deal. That's as simple as that," Zarif noted.

"We don't see any reason for talks; we can go immediately to implementation and then have talks," Zarif said, also noting that "up until now, this administration has done nothing different from the Trump administration."

In February, the Biden administration expressed interest in reviving the nuclear deal, but said it wanted to see changes from Tehran before it lifts the economic sanctions imposed on the Middle Eastern country by the Trump administration. However, Iran has said that it wants sanctions removed as part of the agreement to come to the negotiating table.

In a briefing last month, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the US and Iran are a "long way" from a return to the 2015 nuclear deal, [The Washington Post](#) reported at the time. Price also added that Biden has been "very clear" that "if Iran comes back into full compliance with its obligations under the [deal], the United States would do the same, and then we would then use that as a platform to build a longer and a stronger agreement that also addresses other areas of concern."

In 2018, the US abandoned its conciliatory stance on Iran, withdrawing from the JCPOA and implementing hard-line policies against Tehran, prompting Iran to [largely abandon](#) its obligations under the accord. In December, Iran passed a law to increase its uranium enrichment and stop UN inspections of its nuclear sites in response to the killing of nuclear physicist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. At the start of January, Iran's atomic energy organization announced that the country had succeeded in enriching uranium at 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. Iran had also [threatened to suspend](#) all International Atomic Energy Agency's inspections of the country's nuclear facilities by February 23 if the US sanctions were not lifted by that time. However, after talks with the international watchdog, Tehran agreed to prolong the inspections but in a limited capacity.



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'Smart Diplomatic Move': Jared Kushner Applauds Biden's Interest in Rejoining Iran Nuclear Deal  
by [Mary F.](#)

The US President Joe Biden's administration has expressed interest in rejoining the Iran nuclear deal if the Middle East country comes back into full compliance with the obligations stipulated in the nuclear agreement.

In an [op-ed](#) published in The Wall Street Journal on Sunday, Jared Kushner, former US president Donald Trump's son-in-law and former senior White House advisor, praised Biden for expressing interest in reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"While many were troubled by the Biden team's opening offer to work with Europe and rejoin the Iran deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, I saw it as a smart diplomatic move," Kushner wrote, expressing a different stance from Trump, who repeatedly criticized the deal.

"The Biden administration called Iran's bluff. It revealed to the Europeans that the JCPOA is dead and only a new framework can bring stability for the future," he added.

In his opinion piece, Kushner also praised Trump's policies for providing the groundwork for an enhanced relationship between the US and Iran.

"Mr. Trump has said that Iran has never won a war but never lost a negotiation. This negotiation is high-stakes and, thanks to his policies, America holds a strong hand," he wrote. "Iran is feigning strength, but its economic situation is dire and it has no ability to sustain conflict or survive indefinitely under current sanctions."

Progressive groups have called on Biden to quickly adopt a "new course of action" on Iran.

"The longer the elements of 'maximum pressure' remain in effect, the more it will continue to embolden hardliners and make US-Iran diplomacy more difficult," 32 progressive groups [wrote in a letter](#) to the White House earlier this month. "The recent escalation in military activity between the United States and reported Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq only shows how urgently needed a new course of action is.

However, Biden has stated that the US will only return to the negotiating table if Iran commits to reducing its nuclear enrichment levels to pre-deal levels. However, progressive groups have expressed concern that the United States' position may stymie discussions with Iran.

"We support your policy of 'compliance for compliance,' but the fact of the matter is that the United States was the first to violate the deal. It is therefore reasonable to expect the United States to at the very least take concurrent steps with Iran to rejoin it," the groups argued.

During the last few days of the Trump administration in January, Iranian state television revealed that the country is planning to enrich uranium [up to 20 percent](#) at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. Under the nuclear deal, Iran cannot enrich uranium beyond a 3.67 percent limit.

The former US president, Donald Trump, administration withdrew Washington from the JCPOA nuclear deal on May 8, 2018. Following its removal from the deal, the Trump administration



increased pressure on Tehran, reinstating previous sanctions and imposing tougher new ones. In response, Tehran started to gradually abandon its obligations under the 2015 nuclear deal.

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US Exports to Pacific Allies Rose Over Last Five Years Amid Perceptions of China 'Threat'  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While arms exports as a whole declined over the last five years, the United States' share of the arms trade increased, even though it was already the world's top weapons dealer. Meanwhile, China's and Russia's weapons exports have declined, driven in part by US programs such as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

According to [a new report](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), purchases of US military equipment by US allies in East and South Asia rose tremendously over the last five years, driven by a growing perception that China is a threat.

The report on the global arms trade in 2020 highlights that Asia and Oceania was the largest region for important arms, accounting for 42% of global arms transfers between 2016 and 2020. Leading the pack were US allies India, Australia and South Korea, as well as China and Pakistan.

Japan's arms imports increased by 124% in that five-year period as compared to the previous five-year period, topping out at 2,951 arms transfers, but driven especially by a [huge \\$23 billion purchase](#) of 105 Lockheed Martin F-35 fighters last year. In January, the [Pentagon further noted](#) it has more than \$20 billion in active weapons sales with Japan under the Foreign Military Sales program. Not all active sales would appear in SIPRI's report, since many contracts take years to complete.

South Korea got 3,493 weapons transfers from the US between 2016 and 2020, but also important significantly from Germany during that time, with 1,847 arms transfers. The State [Department further notes](#) that the US has more than \$30 billion in active government-to-government sales with South Korea, including a slew of advanced aircraft such as the F-35, of which Seoul agreed to buy at least 40 in 2014, prior to SIPRI's reporting period. Australia bought some 4,880 weapons transfers from the US in that period, more than two-thirds of all its weapons procurements. According to the US State Department, [roughly 60% of Canberra's](#) 10-year, \$145 billion modernization and acquisition budget is sourced from the US, and the US has \$25 billion in active sales cases with Australia via the FMS program.

US Declares China a Threat

Siemon T. Wezeman, Senior Researcher at SIPRI, said in the report that "for many states in Asia and Oceania, a growing perception of China as a threat is the main driver for arms imports. More large imports are planned, and several states in the region are also aiming to produce their own major arms."

In late 2017 and early 2018, the White House and Pentagon laid out a new strategic framework for "great power competition" with Russia and China, although Washington had already begun a "pivot toward Asia" years earlier when Barack Obama was still president.



Since then, the US has increasingly projected that a struggle against China's rise to global superpower will be [protracted and multi-faceted](#), extending not just to military and economic competition, but also the diplomatic and social spheres. One [report in November 2020](#) laid out plans for isolating China from partners and potential partners internationally while simultaneously attempting to undermine Chinese domestic support for the Communist Party of China as well as inculcate in the US population support for such a struggle.

In the SIPRI report, Taiwan's imports are less than during the previous five-year period. However, Taipei-based military expert Chi Le-yi told the [South China Morning Post](#) that the report did not include the slew of weapons sales to Taiwan made late in the Trump administration, because many have not yet been delivered.

"The weapons sold to Taiwan will be delivered in future years, so they're not counted in the SIPRI report," Chi said. "The ongoing tension in the region is good timing for the US to sell weapons."

[Some of those weapons](#) are a \$280 million sale of communications equipment; a \$600 million sale of MQ-9 Reaper drones; a \$2.37 billion sale of mobile Harpoon anti-ship missile systems; and \$1 billion in long-range cruise missiles.

Only a handful of nations recognize Taiwan's claim to be the legitimate Chinese government instead of the People's Republic of China in Beijing, which won the civil war in 1949 but was never able to invade Taiwan and snuff out the old Republican government. Accordingly, Taipei only buys weapons from the United States, which has continued to funnel weapons to the autonomous island via backdoor deals even though the US formally recognizes the PRC as the legitimate Chinese government.

The report also notes that India's weapons imports also fell by one-third between 2016 and 2020, but attributes this to a slow procurement process and notes that New Delhi's purchases accelerated in 2020 amid the ongoing border disputes with China. Together with Australia, Japan and the US, the four nations have formed the "Quad," a somewhat informal anti-China bloc that [held its first summit](#) with all four heads of state last week.

#### US Still Chief Arms Dealer

Across the board, the US remains the world's largest weapons exporter, but between 2016 and 2020 it actually increased its share of the market from 32% to 37% of all sales, with half of that going just to the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia imported more weapons than any other nation from 2016 to 2020, during which it was fighting a destructive war in Yemen against Houthi forces who in 2015 forced Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi - a Saudi ally - from power. Riyadh was also the US' largest customer, buying 24% of all US weapons exports, or 12,653 separate weapons transfers.

After US President Joe Biden took office earlier this year, he claimed to be ending support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen, but the [State Department later](#) clarified that while future arms sales to the kingdom would be subjected to greater scrutiny, there would be no blanket ban on such sales.

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Deb Haaland Confirmed by US Senate as First Native American to Become Interior Secretary by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

While Hasanoanda, a Tonawanda Seneca man, was the first Native American to be appointed Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1869, a Native person has never overseen the United States' entire system of federal land management and Native American affairs before.

On Monday, the US Senate voted 51-40 to confirm Rep. Deb Haaland (D-NM) as Secretary of the Interior. A member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, Haaland will become the first Native American to lead the cabinet agency that administers federal government programs for Native Americans, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Most Republicans voted against Haaland's nomination, taking umbrage with her positions on fossil fuel extraction on public lands, but four Republicans joined the Democrats in confirming her: Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Susan Collins (R-ME), and Dan Sullivan and Lisa Murkowski, both of whom represent Alaska.

"The historic nature of my confirmation is not lost on me, but I will say, it is not about me.

Rather, I hope this nomination would be an inspiration for Americans -- moving forward together as one nation and creating opportunities for all of us," Haaland said in [prepared comments](#) for her nomination hearing.

"It's difficult to not feel obligated to protect this land, and I feel that every Indigenous person in this country understands that," she said adding, "We want to protect this country, and that means protecting it in every single way."

As interior secretary, Haaland will oversee management and conservation of 507 million acres of federal lands, including the nation's 410 national parks and 544 wildlife refuges, as well as historic preservation programs. The department also includes the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Office of Special Trustee, which together oversee the federal government's relationship with 567 different federally recognized tribes, as well as the reservation system.

During her confirmation, she was extensively questioned on her approach to resource management, particularly the slew of extraction projects on federal land enabled by the prior administration of US President Donald Trump, which ended in January. The Center for American Progress [estimated in May 2020](#) that the Trump administration had attempted or succeeded at removing protections for more than 35 million acres of public land.

This has included [auctioning off public lands](#) to extraction industries, or agreeing to allow them to begin operations on federal land, among other moves. Oftentimes those lands are protected Native sites, such as the Bears Ears National Monument in Utah, which hold a sacred significance to a number of regional tribes, and which Trump reduced by 85% in 2017 in order to open the land to oil and gas drilling.

Still, during her hearing, Haaland took a diplomatic approach to the issue, telling lawmakers

"There's no question that fossil energy does and will continue to play a major role in America for years to come" while noting that "our climate challenge must be addressed."

"The [Interior] Department has a role in harnessing the clean energy potential of our public lands to create jobs and new economic opportunities."



When asked directly about banning oil fracking or the construction of new gas and oil pipelines, Haaland simply noted that Biden does not support a ban and that her job would be to “move forward” with his agenda.

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US Did More FONOPS, Surveillance Flights in South China Sea in 2020 Than Ever Before - Report

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Biden administration has made clear that it regards China as the US' chief security concern and has begun preparing for a wider diplomatic and cultural effort to underpin its military posturing, which shows few signs of departure from the trends of the prior Trump administration. According to [a new report](#) by a Chinese think tank, the US performed more “freedom of navigation operations” (FONOPS) and more surveillance flights over the South China Sea in 2020 than any previous year. While the US performed fewer military drills in the region, those it held were far more provocative than prior years, appearing to rehearse future military operations instead of simple displays of force.

The South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a think tank connected to the University of Peking, noted some key changes in US military behavior in a recent report on US operations in the South China Sea last year. The think tank notes the report is “incomplete” because its data is largely derived from open source intelligence (OSINT), such as automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast (ADS-B), a satellite-based navigation system used by aircraft that might not account for more secretive missions.

#### Reconnaissance Flights

According to the report, the US military conducted at least 1,000 reconnaissance sorties across the seas off China's coast, flying from a variety of bases including Osan Air Base in South Korea, Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, and Clark Air Base in the Philippines, using more than a dozen different manned and unmanned aircraft types.

More than [one in 10 of those](#) missions involved US military aircraft disguising themselves as the civilian aircraft of another nation. As Sputnik reported, these aircraft changed their International Civil Aviation Organization-assigned hex codes in order to confuse onlookers - an action that, if not technically illegal, at the very least exposes innocent people to increased danger. More than one airliner in history [has been shot down](#) after being confused for an enemy spy plane.

In addition, the US began flying several spy planes [owned by civilian defense](#) contractors across the region last year. These planes, based on private business jets, do not have the same capabilities as larger intelligence-gathering aircraft, suggesting that US intelligence demands off China's coast are greater than its present fleet is capable of meeting.

FONOPS, Taiwan Strait Transits



According to the report, the US performed both more FONOPS near China's stationed islands and reefs in the South China Sea and more transits of the Taiwan Strait in 2020 than in any other previous year.

In 2020, the US sent warships through waters off the Paracel Islands five times and through waters off the Spratly Islands four times with the explicit purpose of challenging what the State Department calls "excessive maritime claims." In 2019, the US performed eight FONOPS in the South China Sea and in 2018 performed five such missions.

Although the US has never ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, it has nonetheless positioned itself as the treaty's global enforcer; [a March 10 report](#) by the Pentagon notes 29 different claims by 19 different nations to which the US takes exception.

In July 2020, the State Department for the first time issued a formal rejection of Beijing's historical claims to [control the vast majority](#) of the South China Sea, saying it does not recognize most of the claims of control over water, but did not totally reject all of China's territorial claims. Nonetheless, the US has sought to punish figures and entities that are part of China's reclamation and expansion of those small islands, and makes easy use of alleged Chinese aggression in rhetorical posturing against Beijing.

The US also performed an [unprecedented 13 transits](#) of the Taiwan Strait last year, as well as the first dual-aircraft flight over the strait, and even an exceptional incident in which a US aircraft flew directly over the island. In addition, the director for intelligence for the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Command, [Michael Studeman](#), paid a visit to the island in November 2020.

Beijing regards Taiwan as a breakaway province of China, the last remaining part of the old Republic that has managed to guard its independence since 1949 with significant help from the US. Although the US formally recognizes China's claim, it continues to funnel [billions of dollars](#) of weapons to Taiwan to ensure it can repel a potential Chinese invasion.

#### Rehearsals for War

Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which kept much of the US fleet in port for the first part of the year, the number of US military exercises in the South China Sea in 2020 decreased compared to 2019. However, SCSPI noted that the character of those drills that were still held has changed.

"It is worth noting that, unlike routine patrols in previous years, the deployments of US carrier strike groups to the South China Sea and its neighboring areas in 2020 highly resembled live combat," SCSPI noted in its report.

"For instance, the USS Ronald Reagan CSG [carrier strike group] was deployed to the neighboring areas of the South China Sea for more than four months, during which it swiftly entered and departed the waters several times and collaborated with other carrier strike groups, in the hope of maintaining necessary deterrence and keeping distance with the Area Denial forces of China," it continues.

In another incident in March, the USS Theodore Roosevelt CSG and USS America amphibious ready group (ARG) practiced expeditionary strike force operations near the Macclesfield Bank, the first time the San Diego-based warship has engaged in such drills.

Further, the US flew its E-8C Joint Surveillance and Target Attack Radar System (JSTARS) spy plane across the region nearly 20 times, [focusing primarily on](#) the Bashi Channel and the southern end of the Taiwan Strait. Based on a heavily modified Boeing 707 airliner, the JSTARS carries a host of detection, tracking, and communications systems. Its AN/APY-7 radar can



operate in various modes to track ground targets for 250 kilometers in every direction. Additionally, its battlefield management suite can feed that information to commanders of air or surface forces for targeting or intelligence purposes.

SCSPI noted that JSTARS flights often paralleled People's Liberation Army deployments in Guangdong and Fujian Provinces and Hainan Island, suggesting greater interest in China's mainland forces adjacent to the South China Sea and Taiwan regions.

Other strike rehearsals have included flying B-52 Stratofortress and [B-1B Lancer bombers](#) through the straits north and south of the Philippines. According to SCSPI, if the US were to intervene in the region militarily, it would likely send bombers through both straits at once as a diversionary tactic.

"On the surface, it appeared that the US attempted to engage with the firepower of China with the bomber in the north. Yet, the real purpose is actually to simulate bombarding the Spratly Islands in the south," SCSPI notes. "This model indicates that the US military is making continued efforts to rehearse airstrikes against the Spratly Islands, which are relatively poorly defended by the Chinese military."

The US began equipping its supersonic Lancer bombers with the Long-Range Anti-Ship Missile (LRASM) for western Pacific patrols in 2019, part of [turning the bomber](#) into what military strategists call a "missile truck."

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Turkey Asserts Control Over Disputed Waters Proposed Israel-EU Power Cable Would Pass Through  
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Disputes over rights to the complex waterways of the Eastern Mediterranean have helped drive a wedge between Turkey and several regional partners in recent years, including Greece, a fellow NATO ally with whom Turkey held competing military drills in disputed waters last year. In response to an agreement by several other nations to lay an undersea power cable across the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has said its permission must be sought for the cable to pass through waters it has claimed to control.

Last week, Israel, Turkey, and Cyprus signed an agreement laying the groundwork for what would be the world's longest undersea electrical cable. The 2,000-megawatt, 932-mile-long EuroAsia Interconnector would connect the three nations' electrical grids and be largely financed by the European Union.

However, on a map showing the proposed route, the cable would pass through Greek waters Turkey has disputed the ownership of. The cable would pass 193 miles from the Israeli coast to Cyprus' southern shore, then 559 miles along the continental shelf off the Turkish coast until it gets to the Greek island of Crete, then another 193 miles to Ithaca, [according to Al-Monitor](#). In response, the Turkish government has formally protested the agreement and said any of the powers must seek Ankara's permission even before conducting feasibility studies, the [Associated Press reported](#).



Last year, [Ankara dispatched warships](#) to escort a survey ship to the disputed waters between Cyprus and Crete, where both petroleum and natural gas have been discovered. Greece and Cyprus also claim part of those waters.

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Tinder Users Will Soon Be Given Background Checks on Potential Dates  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Garbo is a female-founded, nonprofit tech company that serves as a background check platform that offers users the chance to obtain an individual's history of violence or abuse. The New York-based company was established in 2018 with the goal of preventing gender-based violence.

Popular online dating application Tinder will soon begin offering its millions of users the opportunity to run background checks on a potential date, as part of a growing effort within the company to curb gender-based violence.

Match Group Partners, which owns Tinder and a slew of dating platforms such as Hinge and OKCupid, announced the new development on Monday and revealed that Tinder users will only need to provide a potential match's first name, phone number, or their full name in order to run a background check.

Garbo has indicated that its background checks are composed of public records and any reports filed that detail violence or abuse, such as arrest reports, convictions and restraining orders, among other documentation.

"This valuable information, which is typically offered by for-profit companies, has historically been difficult to access and cost prohibitive," reads the [Monday announcement](#). "As a non-profit, Garbo democratizes access to information, allowing people to make more informed safety decisions."

The new partnership came as Garbo recently announced that it had begun working with racial and gender equality groups to ensure that inequities in the US justice system are taken into account, and would not disproportionately affect individuals of color.

In fact, Garbo [revealed](#) last month that it would exclude drug possession charges from its reports. Citing statistics from both the US Justice Department and the NAACP, the company acknowledged that while Black and white Americans use illicit drugs at a similar rate, the imprisonment rate for Black Americans are six times higher than for white Americans.

At the time, Garbo also noted that it would not include traffic violations in its background checks, aside from cases involving DUIs and vehicular manslaughter. "Many studies have shown that race frequently affects a police officer's decision to stop and ticket a motorist," the company previously explained.

The background check feature is expected to come at a cost to users; however, it's presently unclear how much the fee may amount to or how it will be incorporated into the platform.



Teams with both Garbo and Tinder are expected to begin testing and building the function over the next several months. Once the new background check capability is able to fully integrate with Tinder, other companies under the Match Group Partners will follow shortly after.

Tinder and similar online dating apps have long been criticized for serving as a breeding ground for gender-based violent behavior.

A [study](#) done by the Pew Research Center found that 37% of users on a dating platform repeatedly received unwanted attention from an individual after being told off, and that 9% of users were also threatened with physical harm. When compared against their male counterparts, women were often the targets of such digital abuse.

Amid backlash, Tinder has attempted to implement new tactics that would help to hinder such acts over the years. In early 2020, Tinder [announced](#) that it would begin offering new safety features that included photo verification and even a panic button.

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Half of New York Voters Don't Want Cuomo to Immediately Resign, Poll Finds  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last few weeks, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo has come under fire, and has been repeatedly called on to resign after several reports surfaced detailing allegations of sexual misconduct. Accusations against Cuomo have been so severe that a pair of investigations have been initiated by both state prosecutors and the New York State Assembly.

A new poll has found that despite the growing number of sexual harassment accusations against Cuomo, the majority of New York voters are not in any kind of rush to have the governor booted out of office.

Conducted by the Siena College Research Institute, [the poll](#) determined 50% of surveyed New Yorkers believe Cuomo should not immediately resign as the Empire State's governor, with voters believing he can continue to effectively carry out his duties.

Only 35% of voters agreed it was time to say sayonara to Cuomo. However, that's not to say voters believe Cuomo is guilty-free of any sort of wrongdoing, as another 35% of surveyed individuals stated the New York governor had in fact committed sexual harassment.

To date, Cuomo has been accused by at least six women of sexual misconduct. The allegations, which were voiced by many women who served Cuomo as former aides, ranged between inappropriate or sexually aggressive comments, unwanted kissing and groping. Former aide Charlotte Bennett, who previously served as an executive assistant and health-policy adviser for the Cuomo administration, [revealed](#) to The New York Times that when she worked alongside Cuomo, he had made multiple inquiries about her sex life. At one point, Cuomo had even asked Bennett whether she had ever been sexually involved with an older man.

As allegations against Cuomo have increasingly trickled in, politicians in New York and Washington have called on the governor to step aside and submit his resignation, to no avail.



Despite the allegations and the majority of state legislators calling for Cuomo to resign, he has repeatedly refused to do so.

Rather than submitting his resignation, Cuomo has instead [acknowledged](#) that his past behavior “made people feel uncomfortable,” and since vowed to comply with the ongoing [independent investigation](#) being conducted by the office of New York Attorney General Letitia James.

“I’m going to do the job the people in this state elected me to do,” Cuomo stated during a news conference held in the wake of the allegations.

The Siena College poll found 57% of those surveyed were wholly satisfied with the manner in which Cuomo has handled the allegations, whereas 32% were not content. And yet, surprisingly, the governor’s favorability standings have plummeted to one of their lowest after slumping down to 43%. An earlier survey conducted by the institute in February found that his favorability rate stood at 56%.

Additionally, researchers determined only 34% of voters would be willing to reelect Cuomo during the next gubernatorial race in 2022. Another 52% said that they preferred “someone else.”

“Voters appear to be able to compartmentalize how they feel about Cuomo,” Steven Greenberg, a Siena College pollster, said in a statement accompanying the Monday release. “While their views on him generally – favorability, job performance, reelect – took a significant hit this month, voters’ views on Cuomo’s handling of the pandemic remain largely positive, except for his handling of nursing home death data.”

Two-thirds of those surveyed indicated they did not approve of how the Cuomo administration withheld data that gave insight into the amount of nursing home residents who died of COVID-19. The scandal revealed the nursing home death toll was 50% higher than initially reported.

The poll was conducted in New York from March 8 to 12, and included responses from 805 registered voters.

The findings came just days after the New York State Assembly [announced](#) last week that it had initiated an impeachment investigation against Cuomo that will look into both the sexual misconduct claims and the COVID-19-related nursing home deaths that were not made public.

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FBI: Nashville Christmas Bombing Not Tied to Terrorism, Fueled by Conspiracies & Paranoia by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Nashville bombing unfolded on December 25, 2020, and saw local resident Anthony Warner detonate a bomb inside a recreational vehicle (RV) in downtown Nashville, Tennessee. Aside from Warner, the explosion caused no other fatalities, but did result in injuries to at least three people who were near the area.

The US’ Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) revealed on Monday that the deceased Nashville bombing suspect had acted alone, and had no intention to carry out a terrorist attack.



The bureau stated in a [release](#) that Warner was acting alone when he took it upon himself to build and detonate a “vehicle-borne improvised explosive device,” and that “his actions were determined to not be related to terrorism.”

Officials explained that they came to their conclusions after sifting through more than 3,000 pounds of evidence from the blast site, investigating over 2,500 tips on the incident and conducting 250-plus interviews. Officials also tapped on the bureau’s Behavioral Analysis Unit in Quantico, Virginia, to pinpoint Warner’s motives.

“Based on analysis of the information and evidence gathered throughout the investigation, the FBI assesses Warner’s detonation of the improvised explosive device was an intentional act in an effort to end his own life,” officials concluded.

Investigators explained that Warner’s state of mind was “driven in part by a totality of life stressors – including paranoia, long-held individualized beliefs adopted from several eccentric conspiracy theories, and the loss of stabilizing anchors and deteriorating interpersonal relationships.”

Early on in the investigation, it was [reported](#) that law enforcement authorities were exploring leads that indicated Warner had believed in a theory that suggested prominent entertainment figures and politicians were actually lizards. Additional reports suggested that Warner had believed in theories regarding the rollout of 5G networks, since the explosion took place near an AT&T facility and caused massive tech setbacks for the region.

Joel Siskovic, spokesperson for the FBI, [told](#) the Nashville Tennessean that the agency’s probe did not find any evidence to suggest that Warner had specifically chosen the blast site because of the AT&T services.

It was further determined that the 63-year-old Tennessee resident had chosen to detonate the explosive device in downtown Nashville at about 6:30 a.m. local time “so that it would be impactful, while still minimizing the likelihood of causing undue injury.”

Findings have led investigators to conclude that Warner had zero intention to “use violence to bring about social or political change,” and did not appear to have a personal grievance against any individual or business in the area.

However, the bureau did caution that while “only Warner knows the real reason why he detonated his explosive device,” officials involved in the monthslong probe are “confident” that their assessment is accurate.

Although the Christmas Day explosion did destroy multiple buildings in Nashville’s historic Second Avenue, Warner was the only individual to die as a result, since many residents had evacuated after a loudspeaker on the RV blared a warning that a bomb was set to explode. No further investigations into the incident are expected.

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UK Cop Guarding Area Where Everard Was Found Sent ‘Vile’ Message to Colleagues About Case - Reports  
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)



UK resident Sarah Everard recently made global headlines and reignited discussions on gender-based violence after she was killed while walking home alone moments after leaving a friend's house in London's Wandsworth borough. She was 33 years old.

An officer with the UK's Metropolitan Police was recently pulled from front-line assignments after department leadership was informed that a service member had sent a "vile" message to colleagues about the Everard case.

Local media reports indicate that the unidentified officer reportedly shared an "inappropriate graphic" via popular messaging app WhatsApp to colleagues, and that the message had been brought to the attention of senior officials with the agency's Directorate of Professional Standards on Friday, over concerns regarding the content.

At the time, the individual was serving as a probationary police constable with the department, and had been assigned to guard the wooded Kent area where Everard's body was found last week.

In addition to the Directorate of Professional Standards being informed of the concerning development, a voluntary referral has also been issued to the Independent Office for Police Conduct, according to [Kent Online](#). This incident marks the six such referral made to the office.

A representative for the Metropolitan Police has indicated that the graphic did not contain an image related to the investigation or any images of Everard.

"The MPS expects its officers to behave professionally at all times and this includes how they use social media," Nick Ephgrave, assistant commissioner of the police force, said in a statement to the outlet. "I take allegations that any officer or officers have failed to observe these standards very seriously and have referred this matter to the IOPC."

Everard's family has been made aware of the incident.

The latest development came days after UK authorities [filed charges](#) last week against PC Wayne Couzens for the kidnapping and murder of Everard. Couzens had his first [court appearance](#) on Saturday, and is expected to appear at the Old Bailey again on March 16.

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Chauvin's Attorney Says Defense 'Gravely Concerned' \$27 Million Settlement Will 'Taint' Jury by [Evan Craighead](#)

On Friday, the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, agreed to pay the family of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man killed by local police in May 2020, \$27 million to settle a civil lawsuit originally filed in July 2020.

Eric Nelson, defense attorney for former Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) Officer Derek Chauvin, stated Monday that he has become "gravely concerned" that the recent settlement awarded to Floyd's family may skew jurors' perception of the case before the trial begins.

"I am gravely concerned with the news that broke on Friday," he said, as reported by the [Associated Press](#). The defense attorney noted the decision "has incredible potential to taint the jury pool."



Nelson argued there was "suspicious timing" behind the settlement, as jurors were still being selected for Chauvin's trial.

As of this article's publication, nine jurors have been selected, including six men and three women. A total of 12 jurors and two alternates are required.

One former juror was dismissed on Monday after admitting to Hennepin County District Judge Peter Cahill on that she had learned of the \$27 million settlement and did not believe she could disregard it.

"When I heard that, I almost gasped at the amount," she said.

Chauvin, the cop who held his knee on Floyd's neck for approximately nine minutes, stands accused of second-degree murder, third-degree murder and manslaughter.

At the same time, prosecutor Steve Schleicher has argued that the state is not involved in decisions made by Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey and the City Council, which announced the pre-trial settlement on Friday.

"You would agree it's unfortunate, right?" Cahill asked the prosecutor, who said it was not his "preference."

"The defense has a legitimate concern and I think the state, even, has a concern," Cahill said, noting he would consider delaying the trial.

Chauvin's defense team previously attempted to get the trial moved to a different city, but that request was denied, with the court stating that moving the trial was "unlikely to cure the taint of potential prejudicial pretrial publicity."

"I hope that today will center the voices of the family and anything that they would like to share," said Minneapolis City Council President Lisa Bender on Friday. "But I do want to, on behalf of the entire City Council, offer my deepest condolences to the family of George Floyd, his friends and all of our community who are mourning his loss."

Civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump, who represented Floyd's family, [highlighted](#) via social media that this is the "largest pre-trial settlement to be awarded in a civil rights wrongful death case in US history."

Opening statements are slated to begin as early as March 29.

Separate trials, involving former officers Tou Thao, Thomas Lane, and J. Alexander Kueng, are scheduled to begin in August.

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'Cannot Bless Sin': Vatican Declares Roman Catholic Church Cannot Bless Same-Sex Unions by [Evan Craighead](#)

Pope Francis drew criticism from the Catholic community late last year when he remarked that "homosexuals have the right to be in the family" because "they are children of God." He also asserted that civil union legislation was necessary "so that homosexuals can be legally protected."



The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith - the Vatican's orthodoxy office - issued a statement on Monday clarifying that the Church does not possess the power to bless same-sex unions, as God "does not and cannot bless sin."

"The Christian community and its Pastors are called to welcome with respect and sensitivity persons with homosexual inclinations, and will know how to find the most appropriate ways, consistent with Church teaching, to proclaim to them the Gospel in its fullness," the [explanatory note](#) read.

The release notes that Pope Francis "gave his assent" before the response was published. As celebrities, rights groups and everyday netizens weigh in on the decree, many have expressed confusion about the response due to Francis' past comments.

"If a person is gay and seeks out the Lord and is willing, who am I to judge that person?" Francis said [in 2016](#), recounting now-famous remarks made during a press conference in 2013.

"I prefer that homosexuals come to confession, that they stay close to the Lord, and that we pray all together," the religious leader added. "You can advise them to pray, show goodwill, show them the way, and accompany them along it."

[More recently](#), Francis was featured in the documentary "Francesco," and spoke of the need to pass laws regarding same-sex unions.

"Homosexuals have the right to be in the family. They are children of God and have the right to a family. No one should be excluded. What we need to do is pass a law on civil unions so that homosexuals can be legally protected," he said.

Esteban Paulon, an LGBTQ activist in Francis' home country of Argentina, told the Associated Press that the pontiff's past statements on same-sex marriage were just lip service.

"They were not institutional pronouncements," said Paulon, executive director of the Institute of Public Policies LGBT+. "Saying that homosexual practice is a sin takes us back 200 years and promotes hate speech that unfortunately, [particularly] in Latin America and Europe, is on the rise."

English recording artist Elton John also slammed the Vatican for what he described as "hypocrisy."

"How can the Vatican refuse to bless gay marriages because they 'are sin', yet happily make a profit from investing millions in 'Rocketman' — a film which celebrates my finding happiness from my marriage to David??" John asked on Instagram and Twitter. The award-winning artist married his husband, David Furnish, in 2014.

According to a 2019 report by [The Daily Beast](#), the Church invested \$4.5 million in "Men in Black: International" and "Rocketman," a biographical film on John's life (and sexuality) that grossed \$195 million in the box office.

However, more conservative members of the Catholic Church, like Catholic League President Bill Donohue, welcome the Church's unchanged stance.

"There will be no recognition of homosexual unions or marriage by the Catholic Church. It is non-negotiable. End of story," Donohue told the Associated Press in a statement.

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## US, Allies Oppose Syria Elections, Blame Assad for 10 Years of War - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Top diplomats of the United States, France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom in a joint statement challenged the legitimacy of this year's proposed presidential election in Syria and said that it should not lead to any international normalization with the country's authorities.

The statement from US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio and UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab marks the 10th anniversary of the world's bloodiest ongoing conflict.

"The proposed Syrian Presidential election this year will neither be free nor fair, nor should it lead to any measure of international normalization with the Syrian regime," the top diplomats said on Monday.

Syria is set to hold the presidential election in spring, per its constitution. President Bashar Assad told Sputnik in October that it was "early" for him to talk about his potential candidacy in the upcoming vote.

The Western diplomats called for a political process with the participation of all Syrians, including the diaspora and the displaced.

"Our nations commit to reinvigorating the pursuit of a peaceful solution which protects the rights and future prosperity of all Syrians, based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254," the diplomats said. "Clear progress towards an inclusive political process and an end to the repression of the Syrian people is essential. We cannot allow this tragedy to last another decade."

The diplomats also said Assad and his supporters "bear responsibility for the years of war and human suffering that followed."

They renewed calls for a nationwide ceasefire, unhindered aid access and an inclusive political process, promised support for efforts to investigate and prosecute crimes committed in Syria and warned Damascus against non-compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention.

The Syrian government has repeatedly denied accusations of using toxic substances and insists that it has been repelling an aggression of international terrorists exacerbated by foreign powers' military intervention.

"Clear progress towards an inclusive political process and an end to the repression of the Syrian people is essential. We cannot allow this tragedy to last another decade," they said vowing also to continue supporting UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen's efforts.

Speaking on Monday, Pedersen called for the establishment of a new international format to resolve the conflict in Syria with the participation of the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Arab League countries, the European Union and the remaining permanent members of the UN Security Council.

At a UN Security council meeting earlier in the day, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said a key precondition in the peace settlement is the cessation of foreign occupation and military activities which have not been approved by the legitimate government in Damascus. The Russian ambassador said another condition that needed to be fulfilled was respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.



Syria has been engulfed in a civil war since 2011, with numerous armed opposition factions and terrorist groups fighting the government of President Bashar Assad. The US-led intervention in the Syrian conflict began in 2014 with a stated goal to defeat the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia). In 2015, Russia deployed troops to Syria at the request of the Syrian government to assist it in fighting the terrorists.

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#### **F-22 Raptor Fighter Jet Experienced 'In-Flight Emergency' - US Air Force**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - A US F-22 fighter jet experienced an in-flight emergency but landed safely at a base in Florida, the Air Force said in a statement.

"The F-22 experienced an in-flight emergency," the Air Force said via Twitter on Monday.

The statement said the aircraft landed safely, fire crews responded immediately and the pilot, who was the only one on board, was taken to be medically evaluated.

An investigation into the circumstances of the incident is underway, the statement said.

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#### **Canadian MP Threatens WE Charity Co-Founder With Perjury Over Contact With Trudeau Adviser**

TORONTO, March 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Conservative MP Pierre Poilievre threatened Craig Kielburger with perjury over seemingly conflicting testimony given by the WE Charity co-founder concerning correspondence with one of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's senior advisers.

On Monday, Craig and Marc Kielburger, whose WE Charity is at the heart of the scandal that plagued the government of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, found themselves on the hot seat before a parliamentary committee to answer questions about alleged financial improprieties in securing a \$670-million sole-source contract to administer a government-sponsored student volunteer program.

In correspondence over business media platform LinkedIn produced by Poilievre, Craig Kielburger thanked Trudeau's senior advisor Ben Chin for his "kindness in helping shape our latest program with the government" to which Chin responded "Great to hear from you Craig. Let's get our young working."

"You're in a lot of trouble here, my friend. You're under oath, perjury is a crime," Poilievre said, after both brothers initially testified that Chin played no role in helping shape the program.

Craig then then admitted that an executive assistant had drafted the message that was sent as a LinkedIn contact request to Chin but maintained that the two had not spoken in the previous two years.



"Your smirking and evading might be fun now, it's not going to be fun when we investigate you for contempt of parliament," Poilievre added, after the two brothers failed to share the name of the executive assistant with the committee and sidestepped a series of questions.

During an explosive Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics Committee hearing that the Kielburgers were compelled to attend – initially the brothers, through their lawyer, informed the committee that they would reject the committee's summons – sparred with multiple parliamentarians and blamed the government for their charity's demise in Canada. WE Charity announced in September that it would be winding down its operations in Canada.

"The government hid behind a children's charity by letting them take the fall for their decisions," Marc Kielburger said in his opening remarks, noting that opposition abated them in the effort. During the over three hours of testimony, the Kielburgers submitted that the charity had paid members of Trudeau's family \$342,955.72 in speaking and expense fees over 42 events, a number they said was not out of the ordinary for regular speakers. The co-founders also revealed that sponsors would pay generous amounts – in excess of \$100,000 – to get "red carpet" treatment and would send invites to the top officials, including the sitting prime minister, provincial premiers and mayors of host cities to participate in the events.

Trudeau as well as current and former members of his cabinet incurred heavy criticism last summer after media revealed close ties between the officials' families and the WE Charity, in light of the sole-source government contract awarded to WE.

Former Finance Minister Bill Morneau, who also faced mounting backlash following his admissions that he accepted expense paid trips and that both of his daughters have relationships with the charity, resigned in August.

There are currently multiple ongoing investigations of Trudeau and his government related to the scandal. The prime minister is presently the subject of a conflict of interest probe by the Canada's Ethics Commissioner into his relationship with the WE Charity - the third during his five years in office.

Concurrently, there were a number of parliamentary investigations concerning the awarding of the multi-billion-dollar government ward to the WE Charity that have been halted after Trudeau shut down Parliament until the end of September.

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**Trump Administration Issued Nearly \$700Mln in Duplicate Relief Loans - Inspector General**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration sent duplicate Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans to more than 4,200 companies, the US Small Business Administration (SBA) inspector general said in a report.

"We determined SBA did not always have sufficient controls in place to detect and prevent duplicate PPP loans," the SBA watchdog said on Monday. "As a result, lenders made more than one PPP loan disbursement to 4,260 borrowers with the same tax identification number and borrowers with the same business name and address. These disbursements totaled about \$692 million for PPP loans approved from April 3 through August 9, 2020."



The Trump administration issued two COVID-19 relief packages last year, totaling nearly \$4 trillion. The PPP formed a significant portion of the programs.

Monday's statement by the SBA came as the White House announced that it had tapped Gene Sperling, a veteran economist who served during the Clinton and Obama years, to ensure the American people get the funds they deserve from his administration's just-passed \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 relief package.

Sperling's mandate will be to get money out the door quickly from the \$1.9 trillion fiscal package that President Joe Biden signed into law last week after acquiring Congress approval, the White House said.

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US Senate OKs Biden Interior Chief Pick, Making Her First Native American Cabinet Member

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Senate confirmed Debra Haaland to be the new Secretary of the Interior, making her the first Native American to serve on a US president's cabinet.

The US Senate on Monday approved Haaland's nomination by a 51-40 vote.

Last month, Haaland said during a confirmation hearing that the Biden administration's ban on new oil and natural gas leases on land owned by the US federal government is a temporary pause to review the federal fossil fuel program and not a permanent prohibition.

Haaland has pledged to work cooperatively with all stakeholders and both parties in Congress "to strike the right balance going forward."

She has said that thousands of leases and thousands of permits continue to move forward, and that new technology to cut greenhouse gases from fossil fuels is key to the Biden administration's goal of transitioning to an economy with net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Haaland previously served as a US representative from the state of New Mexico, where the oil industry is key to the state's economy.

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RPT - Yellen, Indian Finance Minister Team Up for Post-Pandemic Recovery in Asia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman agreed to collaborate closely to establish a strong global economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, the Department of the Treasury announced in a readout of the conversation.

"Earlier today, Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen spoke with Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman," the readout said on Monday. "Yellen emphasized India's role as a critical



partner in Asia and conveyed her intention to collaborate closely to support a strong global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic [and] fight inequality.

The two finance ministers also agreed to cooperate in advancing a bold climate agenda, the readout also said.

Yellin looked forward to cooperating with Sitharaman, both bilaterally and multilaterally, to address shared priorities between the two countries, the readout added.

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New Mexico Governor Disapproves Biden's Climate Change Oil Policies - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 16 (Sputnik) - New Mexico Governor Lujan Grisham is concerned over the possible financial losses the state may face as a result of the President Joe Biden's new policies on oil and gas to combat climate change, Albuquerque Journal reported.

Grisham has sent a letter to Biden informing him that New Mexico can lose an estimated \$709 million over the next four years in case of 10 percent decline in state oil production due to Biden's new oil and gas policies.

The state gets over 40 percent of its revenue from taxes and royalties on oil and gas while 55 percent of the state's oil and gas wells and 63 percent of total production takes place on federal lands. At the same time, in January Biden signed an executive order to pause all new oil and gas leasing on public lands for an unknown period of time.

Grisham explained that the magnitude of the possible financial losses could seriously impact state's ability to offer universal access to early childhood education, the report said.

New Mexico is not the first state to voice its dissatisfaction with Biden's executive order on climate change. In February, Alaska and Wyoming also shared their discontent with the moratorium on oil and gas leasing.

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#### **Dow, S&P Extend Record Highs on Optimism Ahead of Federal Reserve March Meeting**

NEW YORK, March 15 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's two key stock barometers - the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the S&P500 - extended their record highs on Monday on optimism that the Federal Reserve's March meeting due this week would result in friendly measures for the market.

The Dow, the broadest indicator on the New York Stock Exchange, hit record highs for a sixth day running, peaking at 32,973 before settling at 32,953, up 0.5 percent on the day. Last week, the Dow rose 4.1 percent for its biggest weekly gain since the first week of November.

The S&P500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, hit record highs for a third day in a row, reaching 3,970. It closed at 3,969, up 0.7 percent on the day. Last week, the S&P500 rose 2.7 percent, its most for a week since the end of January.

The technology-laden Nasdaq Composite index closed up 1.1 percent at 13,460, hitting a two-week high.

Monday's rebound came ahead of the Federal Reserve's Tuesday-Wednesday monthly meetings for March, and before the central bank's chairman Jay Powell holds his all-important post-meeting news conference.

The Federal Reserve is expected to leave US interest rates unchanged again, at near zero, as it has over the past year since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. But expectations are also high that Powell will express some concern at least over this year's stunning selloff in Treasury markets, which has consistently led the yield on the 10-year Treasury note to hit pre-pandemic highs above 1.6 percent over the past month, the latest being on Friday.

Surging bond yields have been an anathema to stocks, forcing sharp selloffs on Wall Street since the start of the year.

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## Lockheed Martin Says on Schedule to Deliver New Hypersonic Missile to US Air Force by 2022

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin is on schedule to deliver the hypersonic AGM-183A Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) missile by fiscal year 2022, the company said in a statement.

"The Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon is a critical element of the [Department of Defense's] hypersonics strategy, and we're on schedule to deliver this deterrent capability to the [US Air Force]," the company said on Monday.

The Air Force and Lockheed Martin conducted a successful flight test of the ARRW prototype missile on a B-52 Stratofortress bomber last August.

A test of the missile's rocket booster is scheduled to take place sometime this month, a date has not been disclosed.

The ARRW missile is expected to reach early operational capability by fiscal year 2022.

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## SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) -

### MOSCOW CONFERENCE ON AFGHANISTAN

\* The State Department confirmed on Monday that US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad plans to attend the meeting in Moscow later this week.

\* A high-level Taliban delegation, led by chief negotiator Mullah Baradar Akhund, will attend an international conference on Afghanistan, hosted by Moscow on Thursday, Taliban's spokesman Mohammad Naeem Wardak said.

### SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

\* UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on Monday called for the establishment of a new international format to achieve a settlement of the conflict in Syria with the participation of the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Arab League states, the European Union and the remaining permanent members of the UN Security Council.

\* Syrian special security services have prevented a triple terrorist attack in Damascus, state-run news agency SANA reported, citing a security source.

\* The UK Foreign Office introduced on Monday new targeted sanctions on Syrian individuals close to President Bashar Assad, with Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad, presidential adviser Luna Al-Shibl and prominent businesspersons among those facing asset freezes and travel bans.

\* Russia is alarmed by the transfer of equipment of the Turkish Armed Forces and the ongoing fortification works in the Syrian province of Raqqqa, Rear Adm. Alexander Karpov, the deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, said at a briefing.

### VIOLENCE IN MYNMAR



\* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is appalled by the violence perpetrated by Myanmar's military against peaceful protesters and has urged the global community to help bring an end to the repression, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Monday.

\* The Russian embassy in Myanmar told Sputnik on Monday that it was strengthening security measures in light of escalating political tensions.

#### US ATTEMPTS TO CONTACT NORTH KOREA

\* The Biden administration has reached out to North Korea but no response has been received to date, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

\* The United States in reaching out to North Korea went through several channels in order to reduce the risk of escalation, US State Department Spokesperson Jalina Porter said.

#### CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

\* France is temporarily suspending the use of the coronavirus vaccine developed by UK drugmaker AstraZeneca, President Emmanuel Macron said on Monday.

\* Spain will suspend the use of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine for at least 15 days from Monday, the Cadena Ser broadcaster reported.

\* The Italian Medicines Agency (Aifa) followed suit of other European countries to suspend the use of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine.

\* The German Health Ministry said Monday that the use of AstraZeneca was paused on the advice of the national vaccines agency after reports emerged of patients developing potentially deadly blood clots.

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**Blinken, Austin Seek to Boost Alliances With Japan, S. Korea in 1st Biden-Era Foreign Trip**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretaries of State and Defense, Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin, embark on the first major foreign trip of Joe Biden's presidency to cement alliances with Japan and South Korea in the face of growing challenges by China to the American posture in the Indo-Pacific.

Their joint in-person tour of Tokyo and Seoul, yet another testimony to the region's criticality, follows Biden's virtual engagements with counterparts from India, Japan and Australia and precedes the debut of US-Chinese security consultations.

"At a time when the region is facing mounting pressure from the People's Republic of China and the continued threat from North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile program, this trip sends an important signal of resolve to work with allies and partners... to promote a peaceful, stable and resilient order that benefits us all," a senior Pentagon official told reporters.

In both capitals Blinken and Austin will hold 2+2 and separate meetings with their counterparts. Engagements with Japan's Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Defense, Toshimitsu Motegi and Nobuo Kishi, are scheduled for March 16-17.



On March 17-18, both US officials will be hosted in Seoul by South Korea's Foreign and Defense Ministers, Chung Eui-yong and Suh Wook, according the State Department itinerary. "The Biden administration has made clear the criticality it attaches to promoting peace, security and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region... This trip is an important opportunity to engage on critical national security issues and to strengthen our engagement with our key allies," a senior State Department official told reporters.

Blinken will also meet with Japanese and Korean business and youth leaders as well as "emerging journalists."

Austin among other engagements plans to talk to commanders of US contingents in both countries which are finalizing agreements for continued American presence.

From South Korea the Pentagon chief travels to India, while Blinken will head to Alaska for talks with Chinese officials. He will be joined there by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

Last Friday, Biden attended a virtual summit of the Quad, another US-led Indo-Pacific forum, together with the leaders of India, Japan and Australia.

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US Charges 2 With Assault on Officer Who Died After Capitol Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US authorities arrested and charged two individuals for allegedly attacking police officer Brian Sicknick, who died after the January 6 Capitol riot, the Justice Department said on Monday.

"According to court documents, Julian Elie Khater, 32, of State College, Pennsylvania, and George Pierre Tanios, 39, of Morgantown, West Virginia, were arrested on Sunday in connection with a complaint filed in federal court in Washington, DC, charging them with conspiring to injure officers and assaulting federal officers, among other charges, on January 6," the Justice Department said.

According to the affidavit in support of the criminal complaint, Khater and Tanios were observed in video footage working together to assault law enforcement officers with an unknown chemical substance by spraying officers directly in the face and eyes.

"Khater then retrieved a canister from Tanios' backpack and walked through the crowd to within a few steps of the police perimeter. The video shows Khater with his right arm up high in the air, appearing to be holding a canister in his right hand and aiming it at the officers' direction while moving his right arm from side to side," according to the statement.

The complaint affidavit states that after being sprayed three officers, including Sicknick, "retreated, bringing their hands to their faces and rushing to find water to wash out their eyes." Khater and Tanios are each charged with one count of conspiracy to injure an officer; three counts of assault on a federal officer with a dangerous weapon; one count of civil disorder; one count of obstructing or impeding an official proceeding; one count of physical violence on restricted grounds, while carrying dangerous weapon and resulting in significant bodily injury; and one count of violent entry and disorderly conduct, act of physical violence on Capitol grounds.



On January 6, a group of supporters of former President Donald Trump entered the Capitol to protest lawmakers accepting electoral slates from US states Trump has claimed were illegal and robbed him of election victory. Congress' work to verify President Joe Biden's victory was interrupted for several hours during the incident.

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**US Manufacturer UniControl to Pay \$216,000 Fine for Violating Iran Sanctions - Treasury**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Machine control instruments producer UniControl Inc. has settled the case of violating US sanctions against Iran and will pay a fine in the amount of \$216,464, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control said in a release today.

"The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) today announced a settlement with UniControl, Inc., a Cleveland, Ohio-based company that manufactures process controls, airflow pressure switches, boiler controls, and other instrumentation. UniControl agreed to remit \$216,464 to settle its potential civil liability for apparent violations of the Iranian Transactions and Sanctions Regulations," the release said. OFAC said between July 16, 2013 and March 25, 2017, UniControl exported to two European companies 21 shipments of air pressure switches for a total value \$687,189 that were subsequently reexported to Iran.

OFAC significantly reduced the amount of the settlement from almost \$5.5 million to \$216,464 after it determined that UniControl self-disclosed the sanctions violations, the release said.

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**Biden Sent to Senate Jenkins' Nomination for Under Secretary for Arms Control- White House**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has sent to the Senate the nomination of Bonnie Jenkins for the position Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, the White House said on Monday.

"Bonnie D. Jenkins, of New York, to be Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, vice Andrea L. Thompson, resigned," the White House said in a release. Biden nominated Jenkins in January when he was still President-elect.

Jenkins is the founder and executive director of the Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security and Conflict Transformation.

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#### US Army Gives Priority to Battlefield Robots, Especially for Fighting China - General

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - One of the top two priorities of US Army tech is to develop various robots to carry out a variety of roles on the battlefield, Maj. Gen. Richard "Ross" Coffman, director of the US Army's Next-Generation Combat Vehicle Cross-Functional Team at Army Futures Command said on Monday,

"Our Number Two priority is robots - light medium and heavy - [that] can move out on the battlefield, have a weapon, breach an obstacle, put out smoke [and] carry sensors," Coffman told a Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) webinar.

Robotic capabilities would be especially important for the US military in any land combat with China, which can deploy a million man army with 10,000 tanks and armored vehicles, Coffman emphasized.

"There are robotic companies here [in Detroit] rapidly pushing the edge. ... We will fight outnumbered against China: The more robots we can get in the field to reduce the burdens on humans, that is [vital]," he said.

Robots for the battlefield would give the US Army a position of relative advantage where-ever it fights, Coffman added.

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#### US Army Receiving Replacement Proposals for Bradley Vehicle in Mid-April - General

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Department of Defense and the US Army will receive proposals for a vehicle that will replace the Bradley Fighting Vehicle on April 16, Maj. Gen. Richard "Ross" Coffman, director of the US Army's Next-Generation Combat Vehicle Cross-Functional Team at Army Futures Command said on Monday.

"On April 16, the proposals are due for the Bradley replacement: Look for that," Coffman told a Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments webinar. "This is exciting. We are going to have traditional and non-traditional [designs] competing."

The Defense Department's Next Generation Combat Vehicle program is projected to test at least two prototypes by next year with the goal of deploying a new armored vehicle by 2035, according to published reports.

"The army struggles with the vehicular programs because we want everything [but] you've got to make trades. ... We're not locking in requirements until we absolutely have to," Coffman said.

In the 2003 Iraq War and following counter-insurgency operations, the Bradley proved vulnerable to improvised explosive devices and rocket-propelled grenade attacks. By 2007, the US Army had stopped using the vehicle in combat and by the end of the war, about 150 Bradleys had been destroyed, according to published reports.



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**Some Illegal Migrants Caught on US-Mexico Border Found on Terrorist Watchlist-  
Congressman**

EL PASO, March 15 (Sputnik) - Some migrants entering the United States illegally via the country's southern border have been placed earlier on the US terrorist watchlist, US House Homeland Security ranking Republican John Katko said on Monday.

"People they've caught in the last few days over there in monument three [in El Paso sector] have been on the terror watchlist, individuals they have on a watchlist for terrorism are now starting to exploit the southern border," Katko told reporters after inspecting US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operations at the border town of El Paso, Texas.

US House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said that some of the recently-apprehended illegal migrants on the terrorist watchlist are from Iran, Yemen and Sri Lanka.

McCarthy mentioned that some Chinese migrants have also been apprehended for illegally crossing into the United States through the US border with Mexico.

Recent data from CBP shows that 100,441 undocumented migrants that were apprehended at the US southern border in February, a significant increase from the 78,442 migrants apprehended in January.

A total of 396,958 undocumented migrants have been apprehended at the US southern border in fiscal year 2021, which began in October.

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**Biden Says US Close to Reaching Goal of 100Mln COVID-19 Shots, 100Mln Relief Checks**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to provide Americans 100 million COVID-19 vaccines and the same volume of relief checks in 10 days, President Joe Biden said on Monday.

"Over the next ten days we will reach two goals. First is 100 million shots in people's arms and 100 million checks in people's pockets," Biden said at the White House.

Speaking of \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the president promised to provide \$1,400 rescue checks to all Americans in the near future.

"This plan... extends unemployment insurance for the 11 million Americans unemployed," he said.

Biden said his plan will allow small businesses to keep doors open, and help in creating over 7 million new jobs by the end of the year

"It will generate economic growth for the entire nation," he added.



Biden signed into law the American Rescue Plan last week. The bill provides a one-time \$1,400 check for eligible Americans, specifically to individuals that make less than \$75,000 a year and married couples that make less than \$150,000 a year.

In addition, Americans that make less than \$150,000 will be eligible to receive \$300 each week in unemployment benefits.

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#### **Biden Taps Ex-Economic Council Chief to Oversee COVID-19 Relief Rollout**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Monday said he tapped former White House Economic Council Director Gene Sperling to oversee the rollout of the recently-passed \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package.

"I spoke with Gene earlier today alongside [the White House] economic team," Biden told a media briefing. "He's ready to get to work. In fact, he's already hit the ground running and, together, we're going to make sure that the benefits of the American Rescue Plan go out quickly and directly to the American people where they ... in real and tangible ways."

Sperling served as director of the National Economic Council to both presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama.

His mandate will be to get money out the door quickly from the \$1.9 trillion fiscal package that Biden signed into law last week after acquiring Congress approval, White House Press Secretary Jan Psaki said earlier on Monday.

Sperling's job will be to maximize the impact of the aid package for regular Americans, while serving as the lead official in partnership with relevant state and local officials, Psaki said.

He will also hold local officials accountable for any mismanagement of disbursed funds, CNN reported, citing individuals briefed on his appointment.

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#### **US Launches Annual Defender-Europe Exercises With NATO Allies - Army**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US Army has launched its annual three and a half month long "Defender Europe" series of exercises with NATO allies across the European continent, an official military press release announced on Monday.

"DEFENDER-Europe 21 activities begin this month across Europe and continue through June," the release said. "DEFENDER-Europe is an annual large-scale US Army Europe and Africa-led, multinational, joint exercise designed to build strategic and operational readiness and interoperability between US, NATO allies and partners."

This year's DEFENDER-Europe 21 exercises include a greater number of NATO ally and partner nations conducting activities over a wider area than occurred in 2020, the release noted.



"More than 30,000 multinational forces from 27 nations will conduct nearly simultaneous operations across more than 30 training areas in a dozen countries. ...[It] will also include significant involvement of the US Air Force and US Navy," the Army release stated.

The exercise will utilize key ground and maritime routes bridging Europe, Asia and Africa and will incorporate new or high-end capabilities including air and missile defense assets, as well as assets from the US, Army Security Force Assistance Brigades and the recently reactivated V Corps, it added.

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**US Calls for International Action Against Violence in Myanmar - State Department**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States calls on all countries to take punitive action against Myanmar's security forces in response to a violent crackdown on anti-coup protesters, State Departments Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter told reporters on Monday. The United Nations estimated that on Sunday alone 38 people were killed across the country bringing an overall toll to at least 138 peaceful protesters, including women and children, since February 1.

"The United States continues to call on all countries to take concrete actions to oppose the coup and an escalating violence," Porter said during a daily briefing.

"This weekend... marked another new low as Burmese [Myanmar's] security forces brutally attacked their own people killing dozens throughout the country. The military hunta's violence against the people of Burma is immoral and indefensible," she added.

On February 1, the country's military overthrew the civilian government, arrested State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and declared a year-long state of emergency.

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**UN Chief Appalled by Violence in Myanmar, Urges Int'l Community to Help End Repression**

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is appalled by the violence perpetrated by Myanmar's military against peaceful protesters and has urged the global community to help bring an end to the repression, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Monday.

"The Secretary-General is appalled by the escalating violence in Myanmar at the hands of the country's military," Dujarric said. "The Secretary-General urges the international community to work collectively and bilaterally to help bring an end to the repression by the military."

The United Nations said earlier at least 138 protesters have been killed in Myanmar by security forces since February 1 coup, including 56 people over the weekend, despite the UN Security Council's call last week on the military to cease the violence.



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**Biden Firm in Not Hiking Taxes of Those Earning Below \$400,000 Yearly - White House**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is firm in his commitment of not raising taxes on Americans earning below \$400,000 annually, the White House said on Monday amid media reports that the administration needed more revenue to recover huge spending on upcoming COVID-19 recovery efforts.

"His priority and focus has always been on people paying their fair share," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said, reiterating Biden's stand that those earning under \$400,000 yearly should be excluded from any tax hikes. "That remains his overarching approach."

US media reports said that following the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan signed into law last week, the Biden administration was embarking on an even bigger coronavirus recovery package that could cost as much as \$4 trillion.

That package could include the first major tax hike in close to 30 years, as the spending won't rely on just government debt as a funding source, said the reports, which added that the revenue could come from an increase in both corporate taxes and taxes on individual high earners.

The planned changes include raising the corporate tax rate to 28 percent from 21 percent and raising the income tax rate on individuals earning more than \$400,000, Fox News reported. Other changes include expanding the estate tax, creating a higher capital-gains tax rate for individuals earning at least \$1 million annually and paring back tax preferences for some businesses, the report added.

The Federal Reserve said recently that although wage pressures in the United States had risen slightly in recent months, the bulk of Americans were still earning less than a year ago as the annual jobless rate remained well above the central bank's desired 4.0 percent.

The Labor Department's February jobs report showed US unemployment at 6.2 percent.

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 10 million of those jobs have not returned, data shows.

The US economy itself shrank 3.5 percent in 2020, after a 2.2 percent growth in 2019.

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**US Concerned by Situation in Bolivia, Calls to Uphold Due Process in Probe - State Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States follows with concern the developments in Bolivia, where former interim President Jeanine Anez had been detained on suspicion of



terrorism and coup conspiracy, and calls on the country to uphold all due process guarantees, Deputy State Department Spokesperson Jalina Porter said in a press briefing on Monday.

"The United States is following with concern that developments surrounding the Bolivian government's recent arrest of former officials," Porter said. "We urge our friends and neighbors in Bolivia to uphold all civil rights and due process guarantees of the American Convention on Human Rights and the principles of the Inter American Democratic Charter."

On Saturday, Bolivian police transferred Anez to La Paz for her to testify in an ongoing coup probe. She was detained overnight on suspicions of terrorism, sedition and conspiracy related to what investigators consider a coup that led to the resignation of former Bolivian President Evo Morales.

Porter pointed out many countries, including the United States, had realized that democratic rule of, by and for people is a "gift that must be respectfully handled."

Morales resigned as president and left Bolivia in November 2019, under pressure from the military, after the Bolivian opposition, led by Carlos Mesa, claimed that there were mass violations during the October 2019 vote. Most of Bolivia's senior officials resigned in his wake. Power in the country was assumed by then opposition vice-speaker of the senate, Jeanine Anez. Morales called the events a coup.

Anez arranged for a new presidential vote, which took place on October 18, 2020. The election was won by Luis Arce from Morales' Movement for Socialism party (MAS).

Morales reacted to Arce's victory by saying that the Bolivian people managed to regain political power via democracy and that it was a "great triumph of the people." Morales returned to Bolivia in November 2020 after being self-exiled in Mexico and Argentina for almost a year.

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**State Department Confirms US Envoy Khalilzad to Attend Moscow Conference on Afghanistan**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The State Department confirmed on Monday that US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad plans to attend the meeting in Moscow later this week.

"As part of our ongoing effort to encourage and support the peace process Ambassador Khalilzad does plan to attend the meeting in Moscow," Deputy State Department Spokesperson Jalina Porter told reporters during a daily briefing.

Russia hosts the conference on Afghanistan on March 18 with Afghan warring parties. China and Pakistan are also expected to send their delegations to Moscow.

Khalilzad has been for over two weeks on his first tour to the region since US President Joe Biden took office. Earlier on Monday, he departed Qatar "after several days of meetings with negotiating parties and other stakeholders to encourage progress on a political settlement and a comprehensive ceasefire as well as immediate reduction of violence," Porter said.

US-assisted talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency on ending the war stalled this year amid unabated militant attacks. The United States was poised to withdraw



troops from the country by May but now insists that a durable political settlement must first be achieved as the new administration reviews understandings reached by its predecessors.

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US Used Several Channels in Outreach to N. Korea to Avoid Escalation - State Dept.  
WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States in reaching out to North Korea went through several channels in order to reduce the risk of escalation, US State Department Spokesperson Jalina Porter said in a press briefing on Monday.  
Earlier, the White House said the US had reached out to North Korea but received no response and underscored that diplomacy was a priority.  
"To reduce the risk of escalation, we've reached out to the North Korean government through several channels starting in mid-February, including in New York, and to date, we've not received any response from Pyongyang," Porter said. "This follows over a year without active dialogue with North Korea, despite several attempts by the US to engage."

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Pennsylvania Reaches Deal With Promoter to Ban Ghost Gun Kits - State Attorney General

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Pennsylvania has reached an agreement with the largest gun show promoter Eagle Arms to ban sales of the so-called "ghost gun" kits, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro said on Monday.  
"After a week of talks with Eagle Arms, we came to the same conclusion that these kits are dangerous, that these kits are too easily getting in the wrong hands, and they decided, Eagle Arms did, they will no longer play a role in fueling the violence that we are seeing from convicted felons here in Philadelphia," Shapiro said. "This is a significant step, first in the nation, a voluntary ban by this company,"  
A ghost gun refers to commercially-produced firearm that has had its serial number removed or homemade firearm that lacks commercial serial numbers. Such a weapon is assembled using special kits that usually lack some piece that makes the gun not functional unless a purchaser adds a missing part or conducts additional work.  
Shapiro noted that ghost guns are becoming more popular and law enforcement has seized nearly 100 ghost guns during the first two months of 2021 alone.  
Pennsylvania state Senators Vincent Hughes, Wayne Fontana and Anthony Williams have started working on legislation that will prevent unregistered firearms from ending up in criminal hands, Shapiro also said.  
Ghost guns in Pennsylvania are legally sold without conducting background checks and are not classified as handguns, making them effectively untraceable and untrackable.



The Second Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms.

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**US Man Gets 16 years for \$23mln Investment Fraud Scheme - Justice Dept.**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US sentenced a man to 16 years in prison for engaging in a \$23 million nationwide investment fraud scheme that took advantage of the elderly and disabled, the Justice Department said in a release on Monday.

"An Arizona man was sentenced today to 16 years in prison for his participation in a nationwide investment fraud conspiracy that cost victims over \$23 million in total losses," the release said.

Maerki and his conspirators used numerous entities to sell "franchises" and "private equity" to individuals that were disabled or at or near retirement. These investors lost hundreds of thousands of dollars from their 401k retirement savings while Maerki got over \$4 millions of those fraudulently obtained funds, the Justice Department said.

According to the department, Maerki used his appearances on radio shows and in a wireless spectrum presentation called " Money From Thin Air" to solicit investments.

In 1984, Maerki was barred by a federal court from selling securities but he nevertheless continued to sell investments, the release also said.

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**US State Department Confirms US Envoy Khalilzad to Attend Moscow Conference on Afghanistan**

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**US, Israeli Navies Jointly Patrolling East Mediterranean - 6th Fleet**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US and Israeli navy ships on Monday joined together to patrol Israel's borders in the Mediterranean Sea, the US 6th Fleet said in a statement.



The Ticonderoga-class guided missile cruiser USS Monterey participated in the patrol together with the Israeli Sa'ar 4.5 corvettes.

"The Israeli Navy, alongside our American counterparts, undertook a successful patrol to ensure the safety and security of Israel's maritime borders," the 6th fleet quoted Commander Baruch Haviv from the Israel Defense Force Navy as saying.

The 6th Fleet explained that the joint patrols allow the allies to enhance interoperability through communication and command and control scenarios. The ships' proximity also enables a cross deck meeting of commanding officers, who complied with COVID-19 protocols, it added.

Monterey is part of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group and homeported in Norfolk, Virginia. The ship departed on deployment February 18 with the rest of the strike group.

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#### Biden Administration Looking at More Facilities to Hold Migrant Children - White House

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is looking at additional facilities that can be used to hold an influx of migrant children arriving at the US southern border to seek asylum, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"I would say that we have been looking at additional facilities to open to move unaccompanied children into facilities where they can receive access healthcare, educational resources, mental health resources, legal resources, and certainly we would ensure we are meeting the standard we have set out," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki said she could not confirm reports about plans that a convention center in the US city of Dallas would be used to house up to 3,000 migrant teenagers.

The Press Secretary noted that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has allowed child migrant detention centers to open to full capacity in order to help get migrant children out of border facilities and into shelters immediately.

When asked about reports that migrant children are being held multiple days in border facilities under uncomfortable conditions, Psaki said it is "not acceptable," adding that the administration recognizes the influx is a problem and work is underway to address the matter.

On Thursday, a US Health and Human Services (HHS) spokesperson told Sputnik that a total of 8,800 migrant children who came to the United States alone are in federal care facilities.

Data from US Customs and Border Protection shows 9,457 unaccompanied migrant children were apprehended at the southern border in February, which is a substantial increase from the 5,858 unaccompanied migrant children apprehended in January. At least 29,729 migrant children have been apprehended at the US-Mexico border in the period from October to February.

Last month, influx caused the Biden administration to open a facility in Carizzo Springs, Texas, that can house up to 700 migrant children.



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US Calls on EU, UK to Pursue Pragmatic Solutions to Keep Peace in N. Ireland - White House  
WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on the European Union and the United Kingdom to prioritize pragmatic solutions in order to keep the peace in Northern Ireland, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Monday.

The EU earlier in the day launched legal action against the United Kingdom over alleged breaches of trading arrangements covering the movement of goods between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

"We continue to encourage both the European Union and the UK government to prioritize pragmatic solutions to safeguard in advance the hard won peace in the Northern Ireland ," Psaki said, stressing that she would encourage the media to speak to the governments about any legal actions.

President Joe Biden, she added, has been unequivocal in his support for the Belfast Good Friday agreement. Psaki also said the US welcomes cooperation between the the UK and Ireland on the Northern Irish protocol.

Last week, the UK government moved to unilaterally extend grace periods for sea border checks on goods traveling to and from Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom.

The grace period for products of animal origin, which allow for lighter checks on goods, were set to expire on April 1.

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**Canadian Government Allots \$80Mln for Electric Vehicle Battery Assembly - Statement**

TORONTO, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has allotted nearly \$80 million for a Montreal-area electric vehicle battery assembly plant, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office (PMO) said on Monday.

"The Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, and the Premier of Quebec, Francois Legault, announced on Monday an equal investment totaling nearly \$100 million to Lion Electric, for the establishment of a highly automated battery-pack assembly plant in Saint-Jerome, in the Laurentians," PMO said in a statement.

The project, evaluated at nearly \$150 million, will create 135 jobs upon opening and up to an additional 150 in the long-term, the PMO added.

The Trudeau government has made combating climate change a priority, signing onto the Paris climate accord and even vowing to exceed targets set at the 2016 summit prematurely.

However, the government's efforts have faced strong criticism from both the political left and right, with Trudeau being concurrently accused of consistently missing existing climate targets and undermining the Canadian economy.



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**White House Says Probe of New York Governor Misconduct Allegations Must Be Quick, Thorough**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration supports a quick and thorough probe of misconduct allegations against New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Monday.

On Friday, Cuomo vowed he would not resign over the sexual misconduct allegations after the state legislature authorized an impeachment investigation.

"The investigation needs to be both quick and thorough [and] consistent with how serious these allegations are," Psaki said.

She said the White House finds the developments troubling and sees the independent investigation by the state attorney general as "appropriate."

Five women have accused the 63-year-old Cuomo of harassment, with one claiming that he forcibly tried to kiss her, and another saying that he effectively propositioned another for sex. The most explosive allegation is that he put his hand uninvitingly under the shirt of a female colleague and groped.

New York Attorney General Letitia James has opened an independent investigation into the allegations.

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**White House Has Reached Out to N. Korea, Received No Response to Date - Press Secretary**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has reached out to North Korea but no response has been received to date, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"I can confirm that we have reached out... To date, we have not received any response," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked to confirm reports that the United States has reached out to North Korea.

Psaki added that diplomacy continues to be the Biden administration's first priority regarding North Korea.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will meet with counterparts in Japan and South Korea later this week to discuss a range of important topics, including North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Last week, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs for the State Department Sung Kim said that Washington was going to complete its policy review on North Korea in the coming weeks.



Former US President Donald Trump held three summits with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, however, the two sides never achieved a breakthrough on the issue of denuclearization due to a deadlock on sanctions relief.

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#### **At Least 138 Peaceful Protesters Killed in Myanmar - UN Spokesman**

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - At least 138 protesters have been killed in the ongoing violence in Myanmar around the February 1 military coup, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Monday.

"According to the UN Human Rights Office, to date, at least 138 peaceful protesters, including women and children, have been killed in the violence since February 1," Dujarric said.

The spokesman said the number includes 38 people killed on Sunday, the majority in the Hlaing Thayer area of Yangon, and 18 people who were killed a day before.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has condemned the violence against the peaceful protesters and the violations of the most basic human rights in Myanmar, Dujarric said.

"The Secretary-General renews his call on the international community, including regional actors, to come together in solidarity with the people of Myanmar and their democratic aspirations," the spokesman added.

Last week, all members states at the UN Security Council issued a statement in which they strongly condemned the crackdown by Myanmar's military against peaceful protesters.

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#### **Trudeau Says Trusts Canadian Health Regulators as AstraZeneca Vaccine Suspended Elsewhere**

TORONTO, March 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday that he trusts the scrupulous work done by his country's health regulators before authorizing the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, which has been suspended in at least a dozen countries.

Earlier in the day, French, German and Italian authorities announced that they would be temporarily halting the use of the coronavirus vaccine developed by the British drugmaker amid fears the recipients have developed potentially deadly blood clots.

"Health Canada and our experts and scientists have spent an awful lot of time making sure that every vaccine approved in Canada is both safe and effective," Trudeau told reporters, adding that he trusts their expertise.

Trudeau advised that Canadians still receive the first dose of the vaccine amid reports that some citizens are refusing to be immunized with the AstraZeneca. A regional health authority in Montreal reported on Saturday that eight percent of those registered to receive the vaccine shot



refused to proceed with the inoculation upon learning they were set to be immunized with AstraZeneca vaccine.

Health Canada maintains that the benefits of the AstraZeneca vaccine outweigh its risks despite the actions taken by countries around the world.

"Health Canada is aware of reports of adverse events in Europe following immunization with the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine, and would like to reassure Canadians that the benefits of the vaccine continue to outweigh its risks," Health Canada told Sputnik on Thursday.

The health regulators have said that there is currently no indication that the reported negative effects had been caused by the inoculation. The department added that no adverse reactions have been reported to it or the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The World Health Organization will hold a meeting on the safety of the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine on Tuesday, which the European Medicines Agency will discuss the issue on Thursday. None of AstraZeneca vaccine batches currently under investigation have been shipped to Canada, with the country having so far received 500,000 Covishield doses – the version of the AstraZeneca vaccine produced by the Serum Institute. Canada has ordered 20 million AstraZeneca vaccine doses and a total two million of the Covishield version.

Canadian health regulators authorized the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine along with the Serum Institute of India version of the vaccine on February 26 for use in individuals over the age of 18. However, Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI) later said it is not recommending AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine for Canadians age 65 and older.

Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg and Norway have also suspended the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine after citizens reported side-effects following inoculation from the vaccine's ABV5300 batch. The batch in question was distributed among 17 EU countries.

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Foreign Interference in Syria Must End to Allow for Peaceful Settlement - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - Russia believes that the end of foreign intervention in the Syrian conflict represents a fundamental precondition in the peace settlement, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"We view a key precondition in the peace settlement to be the cessation of foreign occupation and military activities which have not been approved by the legitimate government of the country," Nebenzia told the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador said another condition that needed to be fulfilled was the respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity.

Syria has been engulfed in a civil war since 2011, with numerous armed opposition factions and terrorist groups fighting the government of President Bashar Assad.

The US-led intervention in the Syrian conflict began in 2014 with a stated goal to defeat the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).



In 2015, Russia deployed troops to Syria at the request of the Syrian government to assist it in fighting the terrorists.

Turkey unilaterally deployed troops to northern Syria in October 2019 in a military operation seeking to clear the borderline areas of the Kurdish militia, whom Ankara designated to be a terrorist organization.

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White House Has Reached Out to N. Korea, Received No Response to Date - Press Secretary WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has reached out to North Korea but no response has been received to date, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"I can confirm that we have reached out... To date, we have not received any response," Psaki said during a press briefing when asked to confirm reports that the United States has reached out to North Korea.

Psaki added that diplomacy continues to be the Biden administration's first priority regarding North Korea.

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US to Export Coronavirus Vaccines Only After Vaccinating Americans - Fauci

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide coronavirus vaccines to other countries only when it vaccinates its own people, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci said on Monday.

"Our responsibility is getting our people vaccinated first before we start giving doses to other countries," Fauci told reporters during a press briefing.

Fauci expressed high confidence that the United States will have a surplus of vaccines and provide it to other states.

"But that will not occur until we actually have our people vaccinated," he said.

President Joe Biden had vowed that his administration would administer 100 million vaccine doses within his first 100 days in office. During his first prime time address, Biden said the United States was on track to reach this mark on his 60th day in office.

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Pedersen Calls for New Format for Syria With US, Russia, Iran, Turkey, Arab States, EU



UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on Monday called for the establishment of a new international format to achieve a settlement of the conflict in Syria with the participation of the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Arab League states, the European Union and the remaining permanent members of the UN Security Council.

"We should also try to put in place a new international format as a forum for necessary discussions and cooperation," Pedersen said in a press conference. "We will have to involve one way or another the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Arab States and the European Union, and, I also earlier mentioned, all permanent members of the [UN Security] Council."

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US Army Issues \$44Mln Contract for Hypersonics Systems Testing, Engineering - Peraton

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The US Army has issued a \$44 million contract for test engineering, mission planning and systems on hypersonic projects, the Peraton company announced in a press release on Monday.

"Peraton has been awarded a US Army contract for Hypersonic Test Engineering, Mission Planning and Systems (HyTEMPS), valued at up to \$44 million over two years," the release said.

The award follows Peraton's more than a decade of experience supporting the US Army Space and Missile Defense Command Technical Center and its mission to develop hypersonic vehicle technologies and provide hypersonic weapon and vehicle flight testing capabilities, the release also said.

"Under the contract, Peraton will be responsible for providing comprehensive mission support for interservice flight test missions ...To support these test events, Peraton will develop hardware and software solutions associated with the development, maintenance and sustainment, and operations of mission and test system," the release added.

Peraton will develop new systems putting sensors closer to a hypersonic vehicle's flight path and point of impact. They may also develop a single networked architecture to rapidly share telemetry and test data and a new open ocean range system with sensors on ships, barges and unmanned maritime systems, according to the release.

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CDC Urges Americans to Take Precautions to Avoid Another Coronavirus Spike - Director

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Americans should continue taking safety precautions to prevent another spike of novel coronavirus cases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Rochelle Walensky told reporters on Monday.



"Cases climbed last spring, they climbed again in the summer. They will climb now if we stop taking precautions when we get more people vaccinated," Walensky said during virtual press briefing.

The United States is moving in the right direction with respect to vaccinations, but the country is only starting to turn the corner in its fight with the disease, she said.

Walensky also expressed concern over people traveling throughout the United States without wearing face masks.

"We have seen footage of people enjoying spring break activities maskless. This is all in a context of still 50,000 cases per day," she said.

The United States has reported 29.4 million people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus with more than 534,000 virus-related deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins University COVID-19 tracker.

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#### UN Envoy for Syria Urges Security Council to Reach Consensus to Boost Aid Deliveries

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on Monday called on the Security Council to come to an agreement to intensify the delivery of humanitarian aid into the country using both cross-line and cross-border mechanisms.

"I take this opportunity also to strongly underline the need for full sustain and unimpeded humanitarian access to all parts of Syria. Intensified cross line and cross border deliveries are essential to reach everyone in need everywhere," Pedersen said. "I reiterate the appeal of the Secretary-General to the Security Council to achieve consensus on this crucial matter."

In 2014, the UN Security Council authorized a mechanism that allowed the United Nations and humanitarian partners to bring aid into Syria from the initial four border-crossings in Turkey, Iraq and Jordan.

Last January, the Security Council resolution limited the number of border crossings to two from Turkey. In July, it was further decided to remove the Bab al-Salam crossing from Turkey and extended the authorization to bring aid through the remaining one checkpoint in Bab al-Hawa for 12 months.

Syria and Russia have stated that humanitarian aid should now be managed via Damascus.

Russia has said that it views the cross-border aid delivery mechanism as a threat to Syrian sovereignty and believes it was a temporary and urgent measure initiated in 2014. The current situation in Syria, where government forces have regained control over most of the country, no longer requires so many cross-border checkpoints.

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#### US Charges 2 Men With Assault in Connection to Officer Death After Capitol Riot - Reports



WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - US authorities have arrested and charged two individuals with assault for allegedly attacking Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick during the January 6 riot at the Capitol building, the Washington Post reported on Monday.

The report said federal authorities have not determined whether Sicknick died as a result of the individuals allegedly spraying him with bear spray during the Capitol riot on January 6.

The individuals charged in this case are Julian Elie Khater, 32, of the US state of Pennsylvania, and Georgie Tanios, 39, of the US state of West Virginia, the report said.

On January 6, a group of supporters of former President Donald Trump entered the Capitol to protest lawmakers accepting electoral slates from US states Trump has claimed were illegal and robbed him of election victory. Congress' work to verify President Joe Biden's victory was interrupted for several hours during the incident.

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Syrian Parties Show No Compromise, Progress to End Decade-Long War - UN Special Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Syrian people have seen no compromise and no progress in negotiations between the government and the opposition to reconcile and end the 10-year-long conflict, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Monday.

"Ordinary Syrians have also seen no compromise between incompatible political visions and no real progress in talks between the government and opposition to reconcile those divisions," Pedersen told the UN Security Council.

The special envoy expressed "profound regret" about the inability of the United Nations to mediate the conflict and the divisiveness of the international community, "trapped" in geopolitical competition and often focused on backing one side in the conflict.

Pedersen said the only silver lining was that the fact that the frontlines have not been shifting for a year. However, he warned that with frequent mutual shelling and rocket firing along contact lines, there is a risk of a "new storm."

"This is why I have always stressed, first and foremost, the importance of consolidating this fragile calm into a true nationwide ceasefire," Pedersen added.

The ongoing conflict in Syria erupted in March 2011, as part of the wave of Arab Spring protests, which spread in a number of Arab nations against their respective governments. Initiated as an uprising demanding reforms, the conflict later grew into massive opposition riots against the government of President Bashar Assad and turned into a full-scale war between the state and opposition armed groups, including the Islamic State terrorist organization (banned in Russia).

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Democrats Urge Biden Administration to Halt ICE Contracts With Prisons - Letter



WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration must end all contracts that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency has with private prison contractors, 24 Democratic members of Congress led by US Congresswoman Ilhan Omar wrote in a letter on Monday.

"We urge the Biden administration to release an additional Executive Order announcing a plan to phase out contracts between ICE and state, county, and local jails and prisons," the letter to Domestic Policy Council Director Susan Rice and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said.

ICE operates a network of more than 200 detention facilities and the majority of them function through contracts between ICE or, less commonly, the US Marshals Service, and localities for the purposes of detaining immigrants, the lawmakers noted.

"The Biden administration has already taken an important step ...via the 'Executive Order on Reforming Our Incarceration System to Eliminate the Use of Privately Operated Criminal Detention Facilities,' released on January 26, which instructed the Department of Justice to phase out its use of private prisons," the letter said.

The members of Congress wrote that they supported the calls from more than 70 Congressional offices to expand the Executive Order to incorporate privately operated immigration detention facilities under ICE, the letter said.

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**US Airports Screen Over 1Mln Passengers for Four Day in Row - Transportation Agency**

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - More than 1 million passengers have been screened at US airports for four days in a row, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) spokesperson Lisa Farbstein said on Monday.

"TSA screened 1,344,128 people at checkpoints yesterday, Sunday, March 14, making it the 4th consecutive day that throughput exceeded 1 million," Farbstein said via Twitter.

Farbstein noted the last time the volume of security screenings reached more than one million for four days in a row was in December.

The TSA said in January that travel volume bottomed on April 14, 2020 when 87,500 passengers were screen at security checkpoints throughout the United States due to coronavirus measures - a 96 percent drop over the previous year.

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**Netflix Film 'Mank' Leads Oscar Contenders With 10 Nominations - Academy**



WASHINGTON, March 15 (Sputnik) - Director David Fincher's Netflix film "Mank" leads the pack of contenders for the 2021 Oscars, with 10 nominations in various categories including Best Picture, the Academy Awards announced on Monday.

"Mank" was joined by seven other films in the category for Best Picture including "Promising Young Woman," "Nomadland," "Judas and the Black Messiah," "Sound of Metal," "Minari," "The Father" and "The Trial of the Chicago 7."

The film put Fincher among this year's nominees for Best Director, alongside Thomas Vinterberg ("Another Round"), Lee Isaac Chung ("Minari"), Chloé Zhao ("Nomadland"), Emerald Fennell ("Promising Young Woman").

The nominees for Best Actor in a Leading Role this year meanwhile include Riz Ahmed for its role in "Sound of Metal", Chadwick Boseman for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Anthony Hopkins "The Father," Gary Oldman "Mank", and Steven Yeun for "Minari."

The category of Best Actress in a Leading Role includes nominees Viola Davis for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Andra Day for "The United States v. Billie Holiday," Vanessa Kirby for "Pieces of a Woman," Frances McDormand for "Nomadland" and Carey Mulligan for "Promising Young Woman."

The nominees for Best International Feature Film include "Another Round" (Denmark), "Better Days" (Hong Kong), "Collective" (Romania), "The Man Who Sold His Skin" (Tunisia) and "Quo Vadis, Aida?" (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

The contest for Best Supporting Actress includes Maria Bakalova for "Borat Subsequent Moviefilm" Glenn Close for "Hillbilly Elegy," Olivia Colman for "The Father," Amanda Seyfried for "Mank" and Yuh-Jung Youn for "Minari."

The contenders for Best supporting Actor include Sacha Baron Cohen for "The Trial of the Chicago 7," Leslie Odom Jr. for "One Night in Miami," Daniel Kaluuya for "Judas and the Black Messiah," Paul Raci for "Sound of Metal" and Lakeith Stanfield for "Judas and the Black Messiah."

The winners will be announced at the 93rd Oscars, which will be held on April 25 at Union Station Los Angeles and the Dolby Theatre at Hollywood & Highland Center in Hollywood.